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SUBJECT: QUEENSLAND'S LEICHARDT SEAT WITHIN LABOR'S REACH

REF: SYDNEY 371

Classified By: Consul General Judith R. Fergin. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Both the Liberals and the AFP have grounds to hope that they will win the northern Queensland constituency of Leichardt, according to local political observers and the candidates themselves. With the advantages of incumbency and a lively candidate, the Liberals have a fighting chance of retaining the seat. But even pro-Liberal commentators observed that a Labor victory was a big, but not impossible, task. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Liberal MP Warren Entsch has held the northern Queensland seat of Leichardt since 1996. When he announced his intention to retire, the door opened to a three-way race among the Liberal, Coalition partner National, and Labor parties. The successful candidate will need to attract voters from a far-flung constituency that includes urban Cairns, upscale Port Douglas, isolated sugar and cattle districts in the interior, and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the far north. During an October 14-18 visit to the area, the Consul General met with candidates, political figures, and local media in Cairns and surrounding areas at the outset of the campaign as part of Mission Australia's election coverage.

¶3. (C/NF) Retiring Liberal member Entsch acknowledged to the Consul General that much of his 10-percent margin in the 2004 election was due to his personal popularity. This has contributed to the sense that Leichardt is actually a marginal seat. Entsch's strong endorsement of his protégé, Charlie McKillop gives her a powerful boost. A 33-year old northern Queenslander, McKillop has served on Attorney General Philip Ruddock's staff as well as on Entsch's as media advisor. As a candidate, she presents an energetic, informed, policy-savvy, and politically astute image. While noting that the U.S.)Australia Alliance and Australia's presence in Iraq were not vote winners for her, she commented that few voters raised industrial relations and climate change as issues during her door-to-door campaign visits; their comments focused much more on local issues. In tune with the Coalition's national strategy, McKillop is running as the candidate of prosperity and economic responsibility.

¶4. (C/NF) Labor candidate Jim Turnour is intense and less of a people person; he appeared somewhat uncertain about his policy brief. In addition, with his public remarks emphasizing what party leader Kevin Rudd will do for the nation, he was having trouble at the onset of his campaign establishing a persona as the candidate who will achieve things for the district at grass roots level. The issues of concern to Leichardt voters )- which, according to most local observers, include health, roads, mortgage costs, climate change, Iraq, industrial relations )- work in his favor, however. Local observers also believe that the state Labor government's unpopular plan to amalgamate various local councils will not work against him as voters view that as a state (and specifically as a now-former Premier Beattie)

issue rather than as a federal matter (reftel).

15. (C/NF) National Party candidate Ian Crossland trails far behind in the polls and is not regarded as a serious candidate. His campaign claim is that he will not be the puppet of any party, including, it would seem, his own. Crossland frequently boasts that an ancestor was one of the first white children born in Cairns, and made national headlines by remarking that Leichardt was too tough a constituency for a woman to handle. While the national leadership of the National Party hastily disassociated itself from this statement, Entsch and McKillop took full advantage of the gaffe to trumpet that McKillop had been born on a prawn trawler and had worked her way through university on fishing boats. These observations of her hardscrabble beginnings also de-emphasized her Canberra experience, widely viewed by observers as a slight handicap. Despite his having provided this tactical gift to her campaign, McKillop saw Crossland's unpredictability as a potential liability; if voters thought the Coalition partner party's candidate did not support the Liberal candidate, it could affect how they distributed their preferences, she commented. (Note: Crossland told the CG he would instruct his voters to preference McKillop, but voters are not required to stick to the preference deals that the parties work out in advance. End note.)

16. (SBU/NF) None of the three candidates expected the national leadership of their parties to spend much time in Leichardt. With Entsch solidly behind her, McKillop has the

senior Liberal support she most needs. Turnour anticipated a single visit at most by Rudd, with several more by shadow ministers, but if a recent shadow minister's visit is any guide, Turnour will play an also-seen-on-the-platform role while the visitor makes the policy announcements. Crossland did not appear aware of National Party plans to support him.

17. (SBU/NF) Comment. With Queensland shaping up as a major election battleground, the campaign in Leichardt matters. Distant from Canberra, voters pay close attention to which candidate will best represent them at the federal level. The wide margins enjoyed by the ALP in the polls suggest that Labor will form the next government in Canberra. The decision for voters in Leichardt will be between McKillop's savvy and experience versus the prospect that a Turnour victory will ensure that Leichardt's member will continue to be on the majority side of the aisle.

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